

Torah Lights  
Bemidbar: Trials and Tribulations  
in Times of Transition



Shlomo Riskin

# TORAH LIGHTS

BEMIDBAR: TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS  
IN TIMES OF TRANSITION

Maggid Books

*Torah Lights*  
*Bemidbar: Trials and Tribulations*  
*in Times of Transition*

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בְּיָאֵם בְּתוֹרַת ה' חִפְצוֹ וּבְתוֹרַתוֹ יִהְיֶה יוֹמָם וּלְיָלֵלָה

## *Introduction to Bemidbar*

What makes a great leader? How can we understand the great success of a leader in one generation and the decline in his ability to lead the next generation? What causes a nation to descend from exalted commitment to destructive disaffection? How does a leader contend with resistance and rebellion in the ranks?

The book of Numbers deals with the uncertainties and complexities of transitions: from Egyptian subjection to desert freedom, from abject slavery to the possibility of redemption. Why do so many individuals and nation-states resist such a journey, seeming to prefer “escaping from freedom” over embracing responsibility? Why has almost every revolution on behalf of freedom failed dismally, allowing the new regime even greater powers of control than employed by the government it rebelled against?

These contemporary issues are explored in depth in the book of Numbers, and are textually, politically, and theologically analyzed in the pages of this commentary. Most importantly, we attempt to provide a glimpse into the complexities assailing the greatest leader in world history: *Moshe Rabbenu*, a fierce freedom fighter and passionate lover of God, a towering persona who fashioned a way of life to secure a sacred

nation and forged a moral guide to ensure human survival – but who left the world tragically frustrated and disappointed, having failed in his primary mission to bring the People of Israel into the Promised Land.

Ultimately, God's greatest prophet has been resoundingly vindicated by Jewish history. I hope this commentary will demonstrate that our return to our homeland was only made possible by the teachings of God's chief spokesman, and that the legacy Moses left for posterity contains the best blueprint for human redemption.

# Bemidbar

## *Desert, Divine Word, and Divine Habitation*

*And God spoke unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they were come out of the Land of Egypt.*

NUMBERS 1:1

**B***emidbar*, or “In the Desert,” is the name by which this fourth of the Five Books of Moses (Pentateuch) is most popularly known – an apt description of the forty years of the Israelite desert wanderings which the book records.

Indeed this desert period serves as the precursor of – as well as a most apt metaphor for – the almost two thousand years of homeless wandering from place to place which characterized much of Jewish history before the emergence of our Jewish State in 1948.

The Hebrew word for desert, *midbar*, is also pregnant with meanings and allusions which in many ways have served as a beacon for our Jewish exile. The root noun from which *midbar* is built is D-B-R, which means leader or shepherd. After all, the most ancient occupation known

to humanity is shepherding, and the desert is the most natural place for the shepherd to lead his flock: the sheep can comfortably wander in a virtual no-man's land and graze on the vegetation of the various oases or their outskirts without the problem of stealing from private property or harming the ecology of settled habitations. And perhaps D-B-R means leader-shepherd because it also means *word*: the shepherd directs the flock using meaningful sounds and words, and the leader of people must also have the ability to inspire and lead with the verbal message he communicates; indeed, the "Ten Words" (or Ten Commandments, *Aseret HaDibrot*) were revealed in the Sinai desert, and they govern Israel – as well as a good part of the world – to this very day.

Moreover, it must be noted that wherever the Israelites wandered in the desert, they were always accompanied by the portable desert *Mishkan*, or Sanctuary, which is derived from *Shekhina*, Divine Presence. However, God was not in the Sanctuary; even the greatest expanse of the heavens cannot contain the Divine Presence, declared King Solomon when he dedicated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:27). It was rather God's *word*, *dibur*, which was in the Sanctuary, in the form of the "Ten Words" on the Tablets of Stone preserved in the Holy Ark, as well as the ongoing and continuing word of God which He would speak (*vedibarti*, Exodus 25:22) from between the cherubs on the ends of the *Kapporet* above the Holy Ark. It was by means of these divine words that even the desert, the *midbar* – a metaphor for an inhospitable and even alien exile environment which is boiling hot by day, freezing cold by night, and deficient in water which is the very elixir of life – can become transformed into sacred space, the place of the divine word (*dibur*). And indeed those words from the Desert of Mount Sinai (*diburim*) succeeded in sanctifying the many Marrakeshes and Vilnas and New Yorks of our wanderings! God's word can transform a desert – any place and every place – into a veritable sanctuary; indeed the world is a *midbar* waiting to become a *dvir* (sanctuary) by means of God's *dibur*, communicated by inspired leaders, *dabarim*.

## Postscript: A Story

Allow me to share with you a story from my previous life (in the exile of the West Side of New York City) which taught me how the word can bring sanctity to the most unlikely of places. In the early 1970s, a disco opened up in a window storefront building on 72nd Street and Broadway. Despite the fact that it was called the Tel Aviv Disco and was owned by Israelis living in New York, it remained open every night of the year, even *Kol Nidrei* night. I must have placed at least two dozen calls to the owners to try to persuade them to close at least on the night of Yom Kippur, only to have finally received a message from their secretary informing me that the owners would not speak to rabbis!

During this period, Rabbi Yitzhak Dovid Grossman – a beloved and respected friend who is the rabbi of Migdal HaEmek – spent Shabbat with us at Lincoln Square Synagogue. A recipient of the Israel Prize, he is a charismatic religious leader who is well-known for the many prisoners and other alienated Jews whom he has brought back to religious observance. After a delightful Friday evening meal at my home, replete with inspiring Hasidic melodies and words of Torah, he suggested that we go for a “*shpatzir*” (Yiddish for leisurely walk). I tried to explain that the general atmosphere of the West Side streets of Manhattan were hardly conducive to Sabbath sanctity – but to no avail. His steps led us in the direction of 72nd Street and Broadway, right in front of the window revealing the frenzied disco dancers. “Did you ever see a mosquito captured in a glass jar?” he asked me in Yiddish (our language of discourse). “The mosquito moves with all sorts of contortions, and appears to be dancing. In reality, however, the mosquito is gasping for air. That is the situation of those ‘dancers’ in the disco. They are really gasping for air, struggling in their search for a real Shabbos. Let’s go in and show them Shabbos.”

Before I could say “Jackie Robinson,” he was inside the disco – and as a good host, I felt obliged to follow him. He sported a long beard and side-locks, and was wearing a *shtreimel* (fur hat) and *kapote* (silk gabardine), and I was dressed in my Sabbath Prince Albert, kippa and ritual fringes out. As we entered the disco, the band of Israelis immediately

stopped playing. I recognized three young men from the synagogue, who seemed totally discombobulated; two ran out covering their faces, and the third tried to explain to me that he wasn't really there, that his mother had had some kind of attack and he thought that her doctor might be at the disco.... Rabbi Grossman began to sing Sabbath melodies. Almost miraculously, the men danced on one side, the women on the other. After about twenty minutes he urged me to speak to them in English. I told them of the magical beauty, the joy, and the love of the Sabbath, and they listened with rapt attention. Rabbi Grossman led them in one more song – and we left.

I cannot tell you that the miracle continued; it didn't take five minutes, and we could hear the resumption of the disco band music. However, before the next Yom Kippur, the Tel Aviv Disco closed down. I don't know why; perhaps because the owners wouldn't speak to rabbis. And for the next two years, at least a dozen young singles joined Lincoln Square Synagogue because they had been inspired by our disco visit, because God's words had the power to transform even a disco into a sanctuary, if only for twenty minutes of eternity...

## *The Message of the Census Counts*

*Count the heads of the entire witness community  
of the children of Israel.*

NUMBERS 1:2

**T**he book of Numbers opens with a most optimistic picture of a nation poised for redemption. The Israelites have been freed from Egypt with great miracles and wonders; they have received the Revelation at Sinai, which provided them with a moral and ethical constitution for a soon-to-be established sovereign state, along with a commitment of faith to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests, which is their mission for the world; the twelve uniquely endowed and individually directed tribes, each with its own flag, are united around a common Sanctuary dedicated to divine service; a standing army is organized; the tribe of Levi is trained to teach Torah and fulfill all the requirements for the sacrificial service. The only missing ingredient is the necessary obligatory war to pave the way for our settlement of the Promised Land of Israel!

But what follows instead is a total degeneration, a descent from

the heights of an exalted rooftop down to the depths of a muddied pit. The Hebrews become involved in petty squabbles and tiresome complaints; the reconnaissance mission decides against the attempt to conquer Israel; Korah, Datan, and Aviram stage a rebellion against Moses; a prince of the tribe of Simeon defies Moses' leadership by publicly fornicating with a Midianite woman; the entire desert generation dies in the wilderness; and only Moses' successor, Joshua, and the newly-born generation will get to live in the Promised Land. What happened and why? How could a nation so committed that it pledges "Whatever the Lord has spoken we shall do and we shall internalize" (Exodus 24:7) completely lose their sense of purpose and idealism and "gang up" against the very individual who was their great liberator and law-giver?

I believe that the reason for the change is hinted at in the midrashic name of this fourth book of the Bible, *Sefer Pikudim* – the "Book of Censuses" in Hebrew, or the book of Numbers (number counts) in English, after the two censuses, or number counts, of the population, which are taken between its covers. Indeed our book (and this portion) opens with the command to count the Israelites, stipulating as follows:

Count the heads of the entire witness community of the children of Israel, by their families, by their parents' houses, with the number of names of each male body, from twenty years of age and above, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel.

Numbers 1:2–3

Such are the details of the census given at the beginning of the book, when the Israelites are still imbued with a vision of mission and "manifest destiny," and when we still expect them to wage a war for the liberation of the Land of Israel.

However, twenty-five chapters later, after the scouts' refusal to attempt to conquer Israel, after the various rebellions against Moses culminating in Prince Zimri ben Salou's shameful public adultery with the Midianite Kozbi bat Tzur directly in front of the presence of Moses himself, a second census is ordered:

Count the heads of the entire witness community of the children of Israel, from twenty years of age and above, with their household parents, everyone eligible for army conscription.

Numbers 26:2

It is clear that the identification of each Israelite for the purpose of the census is radically different in the second census from the way it was in the first census. The first time the count included “the families [proving everyone’s tribal affiliation harking back to Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham], the household parents, and the individual personal names”; the second time, the tribal affiliation and the personal names of each were missing, with only the names of the household parents of each individual provided!

Clearly, herein – between the lines of the significant omissions – lies the secret of the degeneration of the Israelites. This is apparently why the Midrash names this the “Book of Censuses” (*Sefer Pikudim*) rather than the Book of the Desert (*Bemidbar*): in order to point us towards the solution to our presenting problem by highlighting the different stipulations of each census respectively. In the first census, taken during the heyday of the generation of the Exodus, each individual Israelite felt connected to his tribal parent, to his biblical patriarchs and matriarchs; by the second census, however, that connection was woefully gone, and the individual only related to his immediate biological parents. Allow me to explain.

The book of Exodus, our birth as a nation, is built upon the book of Genesis, our origins as a very special family. The patriarchs and matriarchs were originally chosen by God because of their commitment to “compassionate righteousness and moral justice” – traits which would make them “a blessing for all the nations of the world” (Genesis 12:3) and ideals to which they were to “command their children and their households after them” (Genesis 18:19). This unique Hebraic culture was to be nurtured and developed within a special land, the Land of Israel, which is the very “body” and the national expression, the physical matrix, of our eternal covenant with God. Only against the backdrop of their land and state would Israel be able to teach compassionate righteousness and moral justice to the other nation-states. The towering personalities

of the book of Genesis develop, falter, repair, sacrifice, persevere, and ultimately prevail on these twin altars of commitment to land and law, to sensitive humanity and sovereign nationality; these founding parents established the foundation for the continuity of an eternal people through whom the entire world will eventually be blessed by the peace of ultimate redemption.

“*Yihus*,” lineage or pedigree, has little to do with privilege and special rights but has everything to do with responsibility and ancestral empowerment. Grandfather Jacob blesses his grandchildren, the sons of Joseph, that “they shall be called by his name and the name of his ancestors, Abraham and Isaac” (Genesis 48:16); this does not only mean naming them Abe and Ike and Jackie but rather means linking them to their patriarch’s ideals, to their values, to their commitments. It also means endowing them – and empowering them – with the eternal promise they received from God that their seed would inherit the Land of Israel and would eventually succeed in conveying to the world the message (and blessing) of divine morality and peace.

Tragically, the desert generation lost its connection with the book of Genesis, with the mission and empowerment, with the dream and the promise of the patriarchs and matriarchs of their family. As a consequence, the second census no longer connected them to the tribal children of our patriarchs and matriarchs. And the loss of connectedness to Abraham and Sarah resulted in a disconnect from the God of our forebears, from the promise and the covenant of that God, from the unique message and mission of Israel provided by the DNA and idealistic life-models of our ancestors. That generation lost faith in itself, became in “their own eyes as grasshoppers, and so were they in the eyes of their enemies,” and lost the courage to conquer the land, despaired of the dream to teach the world. By disconnecting from their past they lost their future; and so they did not even merit individual names, names which would count and could only be counted if they were linked with the proud names which founded Jewish eternity. Herein lies the secret of the dissolution of the desert generation. Are we in Israel today not faced with a similar disconnectedness from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, from Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, patriarchs and matriarchs of our past who must always remain paradigms for our future?

## *The Importance (or Lack Thereof) of Yihus*

*... by their families, by their parents' houses.*

NUMBERS 1:2

**E**arly in the book of Numbers the Torah records the first census in the history of the Jewish people: “Count the heads of the entire witness community of the children of Israel, by their families, by their parents’ houses” (Numbers 1:2). Certainly a census is a momentous event – not only as a profile of a nation’s most important natural resource – its people – but also as a means of enhancing each national with a sense of pride in his newly acquired significance as a member of an important nation.

At the end of the day, when all the counts of the various tribes were added up, the total number of those twenty years and above was 603,550 (Numbers 1:46). The census tells us – in more ways than one – that each person counts. Again and again we encounter the phrase in connection with the census: “by their families [*lemishpehotam*], by their parents’ houses [*leveit avotam*].”

This particular term is repeated with each of the tribes and families,

except for two instances wherein the phrase is inverted – in the case of the Levites, as well as the sons of Gershon. In these two instances, instead of the order of being “by their families” and “by their parents’ houses” we find “by their parents house and by their families” (Numbers 3:15).

In contrast, Levi’s other sons, Kehat (Numbers 4:2) and Merari (Numbers 4:27) are presented in the book of Numbers in a manner similar to the presentation of the rest of the tribes – first by their “families” and only afterwards by their “fathers’ houses.” Why should there be such a reversal in phraseology in the case of Levi and the children of Gershon?

In our last commentary, we rendered the phrase “*lemishpehotam*” to mean “by the family of their tribal forebears,” and “*leveit avotam*” to mean “by their immediate parental names,” in accordance with the interpretation of Rashi (1040–1105). However, the earlier Aramaic translation of these phrases, *Targum Onkelos*, which is generally placed alongside of the biblical text as a demonstration of its authoritative position, render “*lemishpehotam*” as “*lezarayaton*” – “by their seed, by their children.”

Thus the usual formulation, found no less than seventeen times in our passage, is rendered to mean that each individual is numbered by their children and by their parents’ house. The message of the *Targum* is clear: an individual is to be counted first by whom he or she has produced – by his or her children – and only afterwards and secondarily do we pay attention to his or her forebears, to the *yihus* which comes from one’s parents and the parental forebears; perhaps *Targum* would include the tribal background as well in “*leveit avotam*.”

From the perspective of this definition, we can also readily understand the reversal of the phrase regarding the tribe of Levi. Ordinarily individuals are defined first by whom and what they have produced – their children first. However, a kohen (priest) or Levite serves in the Temple and performs special ritual duties not by virtue of merit but only by virtue of ancestry: I am a kohen only because my father was a kohen. Hence in accordance with this reality, the Bible insists that their census is “by their parents’ house and by their children” – the parents coming first!

And in addition to special ritual functions, the care and maintenance of the Sanctuary (during the years of wandering in the desert) was divided amongst the three scions of the house of Levi. The duty of Gershon, as described in the previous portion, focused on the curtains,

the hangings, the various coverings inside the Tabernacle. According to the midrash, this was the easiest job in the Sanctuary. It is therefore assumed that the children of Gershon were satisfied to rest on their laurels; they remained in essence Levites, dependent on their “parent’s house” for their status and function.

In contrast, the children of Kehat were in charge of the much heavier items, such as the Menora and the Ark. In *Bemidbar Rabba* (5:1), we read the following description: “When the Jews were traveling, two sparks of flame came out from the two poles of the Ark of the Tablets of Law.” The Kehatites volunteered to put their lives on the line and risk the fire in order to bear the Holy Ark. And their brothers the Merarites learned from their example, volunteering to transport the heaviest wood and metals. These children of Levi were anxious to be their own people, to establish their own *yihus*. As a result, the Torah counts them in accord with “their children and their parents’ house” – themselves and their children coming first!

What we’ve gathered from the overview is that a seemingly slight difference in word order may reveal a world of attitude and psychology. When each of us is counted and assessed when the Almighty conducts His census, the most important criterion in our judgment will not be who our parents were, but who and what we and our children have developed into. All too often, the descendant has descended too far down! And when we ponder the question of “Who is a Jew?” as we so often do within the context of necessity for conversion and the “right of return,” it is important to note that at least from a sociological (rather than a halakhic) perspective, a Jew is defined more by his children than by his parents; indeed, I would argue that sociologically speaking, a Jew is he or she who has Jewish grandchildren!

## *Postscript*

The Maggid of Mezritch (eighteenth century, Ukraine) was a great disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov, and heir to his leadership of the Hasidic movement. It is told that when the Maggid was still a child, a fire broke out in his family home. Although the family was rescued from the flames,

his mother was weeping hysterically. When he asked her why she was so upset at the loss of mere physical objects, the mother explained that she was crying for the loss – not of the home or its furniture – but of the record of their family pedigree, which had been destroyed in the flames. This record had traced back their familial roots to King David himself! “You don’t have to cry over that,” said the young Maggid, comforting his mother. “I will begin a new record of our family pedigree; from me will begin a new *yihus*. Subsequent generations will trace their lineage back to me.”

*Removing the Bar from the Mitzva:  
An Educational Proposal to Link  
Diaspora Jewry to Israel*

*Count the heads of the entire witness-congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their parents' houses; with the number of names of each male body, from twenty years of age and above, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel, you and Aaron shall number by their hosts.*

NUMBERS 1:2-3

**I**s there any ceremony in contemporary Jewish life more vulgarized than the bar mitzva? Back in America giant sculptures of chopped liver baseball gloves graced the smorgasbord, and here in Israel, in circles where the event has nothing to do with mitzvot, the occasion has turned into a huge party with a disc jockey playing the latest hits with as many friends as one can pack into a catering hall. When the State of

Israel was young and innocent, the only beverages that graced the tables were fruit drinks, with the occasional bottle of sweet wine symbolizing the religious nature of the event, but now Manhattans and Gin and Tonics are part of the local landscape. Here Israel's newly designed catering establishments can also point to well-stocked liquor bars, suggesting that it's the "bar" and not the "mitzva" that will be remembered most about such rites of passage.

The origin of the bar mitzva stems from a Mishna in the *Ethics of the Fathers*, "At thirteen, one is obligated to perform the commandments" (5:24). And even though the social norms of Mishnaic times were certainly different from ours, it is difficult to imagine that even in those days every twelve-year-old girl and thirteen-year-old boy was mature enough to throw away slingshots and dolls and accept all the obligations and responsibilities inherent in the Torah.

Certainly the typical twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls and boys in our society are hardly to be considered mature adults ready to commit themselves to the Jewish traditions with proper seriousness and devotion.

If we look at the text of *Bemidbar* in the Torah reading quoted above, we find that it includes the laws that mandate a census of all Jews. However, we only begin to count them – and hence they begin to be considered mature adults – at age twenty, which was the biblical age of conscription to the army.

Thus we begin to realize that Jewish tradition recognizes two distinct ages of majority. The first occurs at twelve and thirteen when the young woman or man begins to grow physically mature enough to parent his or her own child and – God forbid – wreak acts of violence. According to Jewish law, the jurisdiction of courts over this age group is a necessary concession to society's need to protect itself from possible harm.

But it's not until age twenty that the individual may be considered emotionally and intellectually mature enough to be regarded in the heavenly courts as truly responsible for his or her deeds – the heavenly courts symbolizing the realm where final judgments are delivered (for the person's soul). Twenty is generally the age of independence from one's parental home and hence the understandable starting point of individual responsibility. Hence, the Midrash praises our matriarch Sarah by comparing her state of sinfulness at age one hundred to her

state of sinfulness at age twenty: just as she was blameless at age twenty (for until that age she would not be considered culpable by the heavenly court), so did she remain blameless at age one hundred (*Bereshit Rabba* 58:1; Rashi on Genesis 23:1).

I also believe that the traditional blessing made by the parents at the advent of the bar and bat mitzva of their son/daughter – “Blessed is the God who has freed me from being punished because of this [child]” – is not a removal of the parent from responsibility for the child; it only removes the parent from exclusive responsibility. Before age twelve and thirteen, the parent alone is responsible for his or her children’s actions; from age twelve and thirteen to age twenty, responsibility is shared by parent and child jointly; at age twenty, with maturity, the child must assume complete responsibility and cease blaming the parent! Indeed, my son Hillel maintains that true maturity comes when you stop blaming others – your parents, your teachers, your society – for failures and shortcomings, and recognize that you can only blame yourself!

So then why does our universal Jewish community not consider celebrating two ages of majority, the first being the bat/bar mitzva (son/daughter of commandment) at twelve or thirteen and then a second, being a *ḥatan/kalat mitzva* (groom or bride to the commandment) at twenty? The first would be a rite of passage into puberty and the beginning of an intellectual and emotional odyssey, and the second would be a much more heartfelt gathering, the individual having spent seven or eight intensive years receiving instruction in Jewish history, culture, and civilization in the pursuit of a more mature and sensitive Jewish life.

After all, until the age of thirteen, what a typical child who does not have the benefit of an intensive day school education absorbs is pediatric or mother-goose Judaism at best. But Judaism is far more than a series of miracle stories, the pap of the typical Hebrew school education. Judaism is Bible, twenty-four books which include our origins, earliest laws, mission to the world, prophetic vision, and exalted poetry. Judaism is the Talmud, Judaism is the Hebrew language, Judaism is the philosophy of Maimonides, the poetry of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, the mysticism of the Ramban and the Ari, the Hasidism of the Kotzker Rebbe. Most of all, Judaism is a unique way of life, which includes the

rhythm of summer, fall, winter, and spring, replete with the Sabbaths and the festivals, days of celebration and days of mourning.

And finally, Judaism is a history beginning with Abraham and Sarah encompassing the entire range of Jewish experience, from Persia to Poland, from Morocco to America, each with unique sounds of music and special spices and foods. In sum, Judaism is a total civilization, or rather a sum total of many civilizations, with a sacred literature and a unique life-stage at its core.

How can anyone expect children between the ages of eight and thirteen to genuinely appreciate the totality of the amazing culture they were born into? And if thirteen marks the end of Jewish education, it's much more than a fifty-fifty shot that they will have lost it before ever being truly exposed to it. The very least our tradition deserves is mature minds and independent spirits to explore their birthright.

If you've followed me thus far, let us go one step further. Diaspora Jewish leadership has already established an excellent Birthright opportunity for Jewish university students to spend some time in Israel. Why not register each Jewish child at birth with their local JCC – and begin collecting birthday gifts towards that special birthright trip at age twenty? And why not use the bar/bat mitzva experience to “twin” a Diaspora child with an Israeli child from his or her local *matnas* (center of culture, youth, and sport) – and gently, lovingly engage them both during the intervening years with nuggets of Jewish culture and civilization, the many gifts Judaism has given the world? Perhaps the Jewish Community Center in the Diaspora and the *matnas* could be responsible to teach these universal “trans-denominational Jewish civilization” classes. And then, at age twenty the *hatan/kalat* mitzva will receive a degree as a Knowledgeable Jewish Adult in front of the Western Wall, joining hands with our eternal tradition as well as with his or her Israeli counterpart. Only Jews who have been accepted to their heritage can ultimately be counted as part of the eternal Jewish people – and truly “lift up their heads” as members of the eternal Jewish census.

*The House as the Original Sanctuary:  
Redemption of the Firstborn Revisited*

*Take the Levites instead of every firstborn among  
the children of Israel... and the Levites shall be  
Mine.*

NUMBERS 3:45

**D**oes Judaism establish a clear-cut and absolute division between the sacred and the secular, the Temple and the household, the priest (kohen) and the commoner (Israelite)?

Conventional wisdom and commentary would suggest that a single, central national sanctuary with its precise, priestly establishment was indigenous to biblical Judaism, and that it is only because of our history of destruction and exile, dispersion and fragmentation that localized houses of worship and family-centered religious rituals became the operative vehicles of Jewish continuity.

However, a careful study of the Torah portion of *Bemidbar* reveals that the initial biblical vision offered a far more complex, inclusive,

democratic, and family-oriented religious expression and experience, demonstrating that the Creator of Heavens and Earth could neither be contained in one structure, no matter how grandiose, nor be properly served and invoked by an establishment clergy, no matter how professional.

Let us begin our Torah study by posing several questions. First of all, our portion describes the first census taken of the Israelites, cataloging the number of each of the tribes, excluding the tribe of Levi. It then establishes the special sanctity of the Levite, commands the redemption of the firstborn of the Israelites from their original sanctity by a kohen from the tribe of Levi, and finally describes the special tasks of Levi within and around the Sanctuary. The next portion of *Naso* concludes the tasks of the various Levite families and then describes the gifts to the Sanctuary of the various tribal leaders. Would it not have been more logical to have included the entire description of the Levite families in this Torah reading of *Bemidbar*, and then to have devoted the next portion of *Naso* exclusively to the dedication of the Sanctuary? Why carry over the census and sanctity of the Levite families into the next reading of *Naso*, which really deals with the Sanctuary?

Secondly, our portion of *Bemidbar* ordains the redemption of the firstborn (Numbers 3:40). It turns out that in the earliest days of our existence as a nation, religious leadership was vested in the firstborn son of each Israelite family; it was only when these firstborns joined in the desert worship of the Golden Calf – and the kohanim (of the house of Levi) did not – that the leadership was transferred to the kohanim.

Apparently residual sacredness still resides in the firstborn; therefore, these eldest sons must be redeemed, or divested of their sacred character, by a kohen when they reach the thirty-first day after their birth. As a kohen, I often have the privilege of participating in such redemptions and, at the central moment of the ritual, receiving the equivalent of five silver shekalim in exchange for the baby.

The kohen – usually while holding aloft a silver tray upon which the firstborn baby is placed – asks the parents a seemingly foolish and even obnoxious question: “What do you desire more, your firstborn son, or these five shekels of silver which you are biblically required to give me in exchange for the redemption?”

Phrased this way, the question creates an either-or situation: will the firstborn retain his sanctity under the kohen's authority and roof, or will he be redeemed by the parents for five silver shekalim in order to return to a life of complete secularism? Was there ever an occasion when a parent actually was venal enough to choose the five silver shekalim over his or her firstborn son? And yet which parent would not desire his or her child to also participate in the sacred?

The nineteenth-century sage of Frankfurt, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, provides a crucial insight into the ritual of the redemption of the firstborn as well as into fundamental Jewish theology. He maintains – in contrast to most of the other commentaries but in accordance with the chronological sequence of the Scriptures – that a ritual of redemption of the firstborn has always been a necessary act, even before they were replaced by the kohanim as the religious leaders in Israel. However, initially the redemption of the firstborn was the very antithesis of an either-or proposition (Hirsch's biblical commentary on Exodus 13:13).

Indeed, the Mishna (*Zevahim* 14:4) documents the permissibility and prevalence of altars of worship – mini-sanctuaries, as it were – in virtually every household in Israel, with the firstborn sons acting as the priests. These firstborns were holy – and not holy. They led the divine service, but they also worked the land (in fact, they received double the inheritance of their siblings). They were very much involved in the requirements of agriculture and the land's productivity while at the same time they also led the family in religious ritual and, presumably, in Torah study as well. Insofar as they participated in sacred ritual, they were holy; insofar as they were involved in mundane and professional activity, they had to be redeemed. There was no central Sanctuary because virtually every household had its own sanctuary; there was no professional priesthood because every family's firstborn functioned as part-time priest. God was not to be confined to one house because He was to be found in every single household; the world was not to be divided into the sacred and the secular because every aspect of life was either sacred or not-yet-sacred, with no aspect of existence empty of the divine imprint. After all, did not the firstborn "priest" and their familial altars imbue every household with the spark of the Holy, and does not our sacred scripture invest every agricultural act – from the improper

plowing of ox and donkey together to the requisite tithes during the harvest to the Sabbatical year of rest even for the land – with the imprimitur of the Almighty?

The tragic sin of the Golden Calf – barely forty days after the Revelation at Sinai – radically altered this rather idyllic image of a democratically rooted and family-centered religious activity. The Almighty recognized the necessity of a central shrine of worship and inspiration, realizing – so to speak – that the Israelites were not yet ready for the conceptual and ethereal truths that “even the heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee” (1 Kings 8:27) and “every place in which I shall invoke My name, I will come and bless you” (Exodus 20:21).

Consequently, a professional priestly class, totally dedicated to affairs of the spirit, had to be designated; the nation was not yet ready for the complex balancing act of a priesthood which could manage Godly and agricultural pursuits at one and the same time.

Now we can understand why the next portion, *Naso*, includes the specially designated Levite families as well as the dedication of the Sanctuary; it is because both the Tabernacle and the professional Levite clergy were the two changes wrought by the tragic worship of the Golden Calf. And this also is why the redemption of the firstborn in the post-Golden Calf period became an “either-or” proposition, although such a situation was never seen as the ideal.

## *Postscript: The Holy and the Not-Yet-Holy*

It is recorded that the Gaon of Vilna once asked the Dubner Maggid to chastise him – and bring him to repentance. The Dubner Maggid reflected for a moment and then said: “Where is the great feat of sitting in the House of Study, completely detached from the marketplace, and emerging a great Torah scholar and pietist, a Gaon of Vilna? The trick would be to become what you are while involving yourself in the real world at the same time!”

There are two versions as to the end of the story. In one version, the Gaon of Vilna responded, “But who says I have to be a trickster?” In the other, the Gaon of Vilna sat down and wept. Rabbi Ḥayim ben

Atar (eighteenth century, Morocco), in his biblical commentary *Ohr HaHayim* (Genesis 49:28 and Numbers 3:45), states that “in the future the divine service will return to the firstborn.” He maintains that in a more perfect world which is yet to come, the professional priesthood will lose its exclusivity, the Holy Temple will be a magnet for the entire world (rather than a centralized place of worship only for Israel), and we will return to the original sanctity of the firstborn – as well as to a world which will consist not of the holy and the secular but rather of the holy and the not-yet-holy in a sacred synthesis.



## *When Is It Good to Take a Risk?*

*And with you there shall be a man of every tribe, every one head of his father's house. Of [the tribe of] Judah, Nahshon ben Amminadav shall be the head.*

NUMBERS 1:5-7

**I**s risk-taking positive or negative? An answer to this age-old question may be found not only in our biblical portion but in the book of Bemidbar in general.

A midrashic comment on the portion of *Bemidbar* stresses a genealogical aspect concerning Nahshon, prince of the tribe of Judah, which rejects the idea that a conservative, risk-free existence is a genuine Torah value. Certainly such values are not to be found in the person of Nahshon, known to us as the courageous individual who risked his life by leaping into the Reed Sea when the fleeing Israelites found themselves being chased by the charioteers of Egypt; indeed, it was only after he demonstrated his fortitude and faith that the Almighty went the next step and brought about the great miracle of the splitting of the sea.

The Midrash (also recorded in *Bava Batra* 91a) points out that this courageous Naḥshon had four sons, including Elimelekh, husband of Naomi, as well as Salmon, father of Boaz; hence Naḥshon was father of Elimelekh and the uncle of Boaz, two major personalities in the scroll of Ruth, which we read on Shavuot. Now we don't usually think of the scroll of Ruth as a book of risks, but I would like to suggest that in presenting such a genealogy, the Midrash wants to stress not only the characteristics of risk-taking which inform those descendants of Naḥshon, but also what kind of risks are favored by the Torah and what kind are not.

The fact is that courage and risk-taking – or the lack thereof – may be seen as an underlying theme of the whole book of Bemidbar. The fourth book of the Torah records the history of the Israelites' forty years of wandering the desert. When it opens we do not yet know that the people will be punished to wander for forty years, but by the time the book closes it is clear that the Jewish people have failed their first major test. When the spies return with a frightening report about the Promised Land and the ability to conquer it (Numbers 13–14), the Hebrews demonstrate a total lack of resolve, courage, and faith. They wail, they tremble, they plead not to go on with the mission. Apparently they have become too accustomed to the safe and secure desert life – manna providing a daily ration of food, a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night directing their travel plans – to take the risks into the unknown involved in the conquest and settlement of Israel.

But the Torah wants the Hebrews to act with courage, to make the first heroic and even dangerous moves which come with independence and responsibility. Naḥshon at the shore of the Reed Sea shines as the antithesis of a cowardly “desert generation.” Because of his faith, and his daring, the people were saved. Indeed the Gaon of Vilna points out that the Torah first describes the Israelites as having gone “into the midst of the sea on the dry land” (Exodus 14:22), and later “on dry land in the midst of the sea” (Exodus 14:29). The initial description refers to Naḥshon and his followers, who risked their lives by jumping into the raging waters; God made a miracle for him, the waters splitting into dry land and serving as a wall (*homa*) to them on the right and the left. The latter description refers to the rest of the Israelites who only entered after the dry land appeared; for them the waters became a

wall – but this time written without the letter *vav*, which can also spell *hema*, which means anger.

Naḥshon's remarkable ability to take risks – in contrast to most of the generation of the desert – was transmitted to his son and nephew. Hence, the scroll of Ruth closes with the names of ten generations from Peretz (son of Judah) to King David, and Naḥshon appears right in the center, the pivotal figure between the age of the patriarchs and the generation of the future Messiah of the Jewish people. But while Naḥshon and Boaz are to be praised for their risk-taking, Elimelekh can only be reviled for his.

When a terrible famine descends upon Bethlehem in Judah, the home of Elimelekh, he packs up his family and decides to start a new life in the Land of Moab. Undoubtedly, this demonstrates courage on the part of Elimelekh, the ability to risk the unknown in a strange environment. But his motivation was greed; he refused to share his bounty with his starving kinsmen, and he was willing to leave his homeland and his ancestral roots for the sake of his wealth. Hence, tragedy strikes. Elimelekh dies, and his sons – to be expected – marry Moabite women. His sons die as strangers in a strange land, and even any potential progeny they may leave behind will be lost to Jewish future, to Jewish destiny. Elimelekh reaped a harvest of oblivion, from a Jewish point of view, as the fruit of his risk-taking in Moab.

In contrast, Boaz does not leave Bethlehem during the famine. And when the challenge arises to do an act of loving-kindness for Naomi and redeem Elimelekh's land – as well as to marry the stranger-convert Ruth – Boaz assumes the financial obligation and takes upon himself the social risk involved in the marriage. And the descendant from this union turns out to be none other than King David, from whom the future messianic line emerges.

Elimelekh's risk was based upon greed, and involved forsaking his land and his tradition; it ended in his death and destruction. Boaz's risk was based upon love and loving-kindness, and resulted in redemption. The Elimelekh-Boaz dialectic is a perennial theme in the Jewish world. Risk is positive, and even mandatory, from a Jewish perspective. The question we have to ask ourselves is the motivation, and that is what will determine the result.